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SUBJECT: Ambassador's Comments on Belgium and
Afghanistan Spark Parliamentary Exchange

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador has used a series of end-of-tour interviews with Belgium's print and electronic media to highlight the need for Belgium to make a greater contribution to the NATO effort in Afghanistan. His pointed comments have gained prominent attention, both as one of the lead items on national news broadcasts and an exchange in Parliament during which the Prime Minister declared publicly that Belgium would fulfill its obligations and that Belgium's Afghanistan policy had been developed after consultation with the former SHAPE commander, General Jones. Coming in the middle of the Ambassador's farewells, we have been able to make clear to the Belgians that we have not given up our efforts to secure a greater commitment to Afghanistan. End summary.

¶2. (U) The Ambassador's planned departure from Belgium on February 6 has provided him with a platform for pressing a number of key USG concerns with the broader Belgian public. He has spoken with major French and Flemish media outlets, and a session with a journalist who hosts a website aimed at a predominantly Muslim audience. This outreach has sparked strongly positive coverage, including praise for the Ambassador's straightforward, open method of dealing with journalists. In each of his interviews, the Ambassador accentuated the positives of the last two and a half years, including Belgium's amendment of its "universal competence" law, initiatives to revive the Trans-Atlantic relationship, and close cooperation with the U.S. on issues like Iran and counter-terrorism.

¶3. (U) While highlighting the steady upturn in bilateral relations, the Ambassador noted our continuing effort to promote increased Belgian involvement in Afghanistan. He specifically argued for Belgium (and other European states) to do more there. In the case of Belgium, that would mean providing additional troops to augment the existing force of 300. The Ambassador noted that the Verhofstadt government did intend to add about 40 additional forces later this year, when Belgium expected to assume command over operations at Kabul airport.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador's remarks about Afghanistan had an immediate impact on Belgium's internal political debate. During the Prime Minister's February 1 Question Time in Parliament, opposition floor leader De Crem heckled PM Verhofstadt for not living up to Belgium's obligations, even as he profligately pledged to provide troops to UNIFIL, and expend extra Euro 30 million in development aid for Afghanistan. The Prime Minister's reply argued that Belgium had been present at the ground floor of all major operations, and that there now were 1,200 troops serving overseas. Verhofstadt confirmed plans to send a 40 person unit in October to oversee

airport management, and emphasized that Belgian actions had followed a "long discussion" about Afghanistan's future with former SACEUR General Jones. At a private farewell dinner, FM De Gucht said that the only person in the Cabinet who disagreed with Ambassador Korologos was Minister of Defense Flahaut.

¶5. (SBU) The Prime Minister reaffirmed his position during the Ambassador's farewell call on February 5. Making clear that the Ambassador's interviews had caused him no difficulties, the Prime Minister spoke acidly about his Flemish Socialist coalition partners, who were "against" everything. Asked about an earlier idea of redeploying F-16's to Afghanistan, Verhofstadt said he understood SACEUR did not want them.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The prominent play given the Ambassador's remarks about Afghanistan was a clear reminder to the Belgians that we would continue to press them about this issue. Although the June 10 elections will undoubtedly limit interest in foreign affairs issues, we will continue to seek out opportunities to achieve this goal.
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